

# Firepower

By Carolyn Golledge; Illustrations by Doug Shuler

More red lights flashed on the X-wing's flight-board and laser-scored gray metal filled the viewport. Squadron leader Makintay's R2 droid squealed and chattered alarms, telling him they'd just lost their port-side firepower. The laser tip assembly snapped off as the S-foil barely cleared the Imperial carrier's underbelly.

"We can do it. Hang in there," Mak urged, willing his small fighter free. Red-gold light filled the cockpit, the X-wing very nearly consumed by the carrier's burning exhaust. Mak squeezed his eyes shut, then in the next breath, the glare was gone. The starfield welcomed him as he swooped up and out, accelerating toward the jump point.

"Green Leader," his wingman called, "Are you okay?"

"Dammit, Dallin," Mak snapped, "Obey orders. Go!" Both Green and Blue squadrons should no longer be visible. They'd been given a pre-set hyperspace vector to jump out of the battle zone. Mak noted their Corellian corvette companion had jumped to safety. They'd hoped to see her board the Imperial carrier. Mak cursed; no chance of that now. Somehow the carrier had by-passed the Rebels' jamming signals to recall its TIE fighter escort.

Responding to their commander's orders, Dallin and the six fighters following him in a tight V formation winked out into hyperspace.

Makintay gave one quick glance behind, a farewell to the young pilot he had tried to save. Spinning ever deeper into space, Gifford's X-wing had been reduced to fragmented debris. "Damn you, Dru," Mak cursed, his voice rough with restrained emotion, "I told you to leave it." He had no time for further eulogy. The TIEs rounded the carrier, bearing down on him, seeking another kill.

Mak punched the hyperspace jump and the starlight blurred further with his filmed vision. Gifford too had known how badly their Rebel friends back at Eyrie Base needed those supplies. The ground crews were listless and tired as much because of meager rations as a crippling work schedule. The Hoth disaster hadn't helped matters. Eyrie had come to the aid of the survivors, giving what little they could spare to aid the Alliance's Central Command in establishing a new base.

It was a vicious circle that grew more so with each passing day --they desperately needed to capture an Imperial supply ship, or raid one of their bases, but ever more X-wings were grounded for want of replacement parts. Curse the luck. They'd had that stray carrier almost completely disabled, the ventral engine the only one still burning when those TIEs had returned.

So near yet so far, and worse, Gifford was dead, another X-wing lost to them. Mak had tried so hard to save the boy, risking his own life. He'd diverted two of Gifford's pursuers, thrusting his fighter into the fray as the foolhardy, brave Rebel dared one last blast at the carrier's engine. Mak had imagined his X-wing as a defending sword in his fist, flashing down to intercept the enemies' blades.

In the high-tech worlds beyond Makintay's native planet, Hargeeva, the sword was considered an archaic weapon. Mak snorted. No, even at home in Arginall City the sword would be considered hopelessly out-of-date these days. But 20 years ago, on his eighth birthday, Mak had been sent for the customary training with his father's Palace Guard. Little more than an infant, he'd still been bowed and scraped to, called "M'Lord" by grizzled, battle-hardened soldiers. Lord Stevan Makintay, elder son and heir. It seemed impossible those days could have belonged to the one lifetime.



Disinherited by an enraged father, all that stayed with Mak was his useless expertise with a sword. Still there was much in fencing moves that could be adapted to battle strategies even when an Xwing was your weapon. Mak's pilots liked to joke about his frequent sword-references. They assumed he'd earned his famous scar in one of his native-world's aristocratic duels. Mak smiled and touched a gloved hand to that thin white line running from the corner of his right eye to the earlobe. No way would he ever reveal it was a jealous lover had given him that cut. Ketrin Altronel was definitely not the forgiving kind.

It had to have been years since he'd last seen her. He often wondered if she ever asked after him. But no, he knew she'd have lost herself to her work. He'd never known anyone who could become so passionate about metal alloys. She was a brilliant metallurgist; he'd heard she'd recently been promoted to head of her department. Working for the Empire. And probably devoted to the Empire, too. Anyone who could back her revolutionary scientific theories with generously funded research grants would certainly win her favor.

Stars alone knew what she might have invented by now; she rarely knew what day it was when some idea had hold of her. It was as well she could find solace in her work, Mak mused, feeling the accustomed twinge of guilt. Maybe he should have tried harder to contact her, to explain. It had hurt him to think she believed he'd abandoned her.

A beeping from his flight computer brought Mak out of his reminiscing. His R2 unit informed him they were coming up on Karatha. As the star lines streaked back into place about him, Mak could find none of his usual relief to be safely home. Ahead of him, just about to disappear into Karatha's blue-green atmosphere, Mak counted one fighter missing. For all his stern discipline, Mak loved his men, did his best to protect them. He'd been proud of his low casualty rate. Until today.

Mak's hand trembled as he checked his sensors, grief evaporating in a white-hot inferno of pure rage. There were those responsible for Gifford's death, complacent, safe in their command council seats, sending young men to battle with failing equipment and even worse intelligence reports. It looked to be a lovely bright day down there, a new day Gifford would not see.

Early morning sea-fogs had melted away from the towering limestone cliffs that held the Eyrie. That was the pilots' name for the natural sink-hole that housed the base's main hangar two levels above the living quarters that bordered the sandy beach below. A far cry from the icy nightmare Mak recalled before his transfer here from Hoth. But they'd had more food, more fuel, more personnel on Hoth.

Mak's rage peaked as he remembered the pre-dawn call-up by fighter command. They'd had word from intelligence of a straying Imperial supply carrier. All the squadrons were excited about that, but Mak and his fellow leaders had been refused the extra fighters they believed they would need to ensure the carrier's capture. They couldn't afford the time needed to finish repairs on those downed Xwings -- even if they had the necessary parts. Intelligence had assured them they would meet little opposition. Now Gifford was dead, and they were returning empty-handed.

Today would be the last time they would be sent out underprepared. Mak swore it would not happen again. Swinging his X-wing about so that it swooped home along the sea-cliffs like one of the native birds of prey, Mak determined to deliver that oath to Intelligence Commander Baran without delay. Slag the orders! Fighter command could wait to debrief him. Who knows? He might even have cooled down a little by then, but he doubted it. One glance at Gifford's empty place would be enough to insure that.

He took savage pleasure in rehearsing a blistering speech, his R2 droid doing much of the work as the X-wing was guided down and into the hangar. Mak was climbing up and out of his seat as soon as the canopy slid back.

"Sorry, Mak," he heard someone say softly behind him as his boots met the tarmac. "Dallin said you did all you could."

"Yeah?" Mak snarled. He swung about, confronting Merinda, the tiny female tech who was leader of his ground crew. Even the genuine concern in her



ovoid green eyes could not cool his temper. "Well, it wasn't enough," he shouted. "And this time," he hefted an accusing forefinger, "those incompetent chair-polishers aren't getting away with it." He stormed off toward the turbolift that would take him down to Command Center.

"Wait, Mak!" Merinda jogged to keep up with him. "Think!" She grabbed at his arm, slowing him a little. She knew that even in a rage he was too much of a gentleman to push her aside. The turbolift was full and she took her chance as he was forced to wait. "What good will it do you to get demoted again? You remember what happened last time."

Mak glared at her, ready to tell her he didn't care. But that wasn't true; not being squadron leader left less able men to protect his pilots. "Slag it, Merin," he said, suddenly weary. "I've got to do *something*!" Frustrated, he ran a hand through his disarrayed hair.

"I know," she said sympathetically, "and I agree. But you need a plan if you're to have any real impact on that idiot, Barren-Brain."

The familiar disparaging name for Commander Baran brought a faint smile to Mak's lips. "A plan, huh?" he said. He waved his chief tech into the turbolift as it opened for them. "You're up to something. Give!"

She did so, laying out her ideas for confronting command with a scheme to secure experts who could manufacture needed replacement parts on Karatha rather than having the squadrons go raiding for them.

"It sure beats anything Baran's come up with lately," Mak agreed as they stepped out of the lift again.

"Thanks a million," Merinda said sourly. "A newt-worm could outthink Baran."

"I didn't mean ... " He saw her grin and realized she was teasing again, trying to trigger his "high-falutin' manners."

"It's just that I know what Baran will say."

"Me, too." She imitated Baran's prim and proper tone. "And just where are all these eager-to-defect experts you've been hiding from us, Chief? Under your bed? In your tool kit?"

"Expert!" Mak exclaimed, coming to a halt so suddenly that Merinda collided with him. "That's it. I should have thought of it sooner."

"What?" she demanded.

"Not what. Who," he declared, smiling. "Ketrian Altronel."

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*He looks nothing like his son,* Ketrian thought sourly. She stood on the far side of Arginall Refinery's small office, observing Imperial Governor Makintay's expression as he tried to comprehend the computer diagnostics. *Never did, but all those dinner parties aren't helping.*

"Pompous old fool," Alikka Nolan whispered to Ketrian. "He hasn't the faintest idea of what he's looking at." As personnel supervisor she was expected to be present for the evaluation of Altronel's alloy sample.

"No," Ketrian replied, leaning down to her shorter fair-haired friend, "but he sure does." She indicated the middle-aged uniformed Imperial seated beside the governor.

Major Nial Pedrin was commander of the Arginall garrison attached to the refinery. Also a qualified geologist, he'd been given this posting when the Empire discovered Hargeeva's mineral wealth. Variety and individuality were Pedrin's pet hates. Naturally his only other interest was geology -- stone never changed. Or at least it did not unless it was brought in to one of Ketrian's laboratories.

Today's sample was the result of her work on a mineral known as ostrine. After months of trying various combinations, Ketrian had uncovered the correct trace elements and come up with a revolutionary method of crystalline and plas-bonding that made the raw ostrine about as different as it could get. Pedrin's eyes widened further with each line he read. He picked the alloy sample up from the desk, his fingers almost seeming to caress it.



Alikka shifted impatiently. Pedrin glanced up at her, his spaceblack eyes funereal beneath his thin brows, penetrating. Alikka held his gaze steadily. The two shared as much mutual animosity as did Ketrian and the governor.

"Well?" Governor Makintay prompted.

"It seems suitable to me." Pedrin's burning eyes moved to him and the older man flushed. Makintay may be governor, but it was Pedrin who wielded the true power on Hargeeva. "Of course, you're the expert." Chastened, Makintay lowered his double chin onto his red satina-clothed chest. Pedrin disapproved of the Hargeevan aristocracy's traditional dress.

Pedrin put the alloy back on the desk, and lifted his forefinger to press down his already smooth mustache. "A remarkable piece of work," he said. His eyes gleamed with reflected computer light as he looked up at Ketrian. "Remarkable."

Not since her university days had Ketrian heard such open praise. "Thank you, Major," she said. She could feel herself blushing and knew her face must match her hair-color. "Finding the exact formula to increase the heat absorption ten-fold like that was ... "

"No doubt," he interrupted, getting to his feet. His stormtrooper guard moved to open the door behind the women. "As of now these findings are classified top secret. You understand?" They nodded. "Top secret," he repeated, his hard eyes settling on Alikka. "Not a word to anyone outside this complex. There are severe penalties for loose talk. I would not want to have to remind you of those penalties a second time, Supervisor."

Alikka's gray eyes flashed defiance. "And just who do you think would be interested? You've already imprisoned ... "

"You'll want to relay those diagnostics to your superiors immediately, I suppose?" Ketrian changed the subject.

Pedrin nodded, his eyes still on Alikka.

"Then we'll leave you to it. It's all there, ready for downloading. Alikka and I have a dinner appointment in town." She took her friend's arm.

"The Lantern Inn again?" Pedrin asked.

Ketrian sighed irritably. "Yes. Must you have your men follow us wherever we go?"

"It is for your own protection," he said, "never forget that."

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Ketrian's small apartment adjoined the refinery complex, as did all the living quarters. She found that convenient, but Alikka complained it was like living in a prison. There was only one gate in the surrounding, high duracrete walls, always heavily guarded. Up on the walkways the troopers' white armor was burnished by the setting sun.

Ketrian opened her front door and left Alikka in the living room. She had bought a new dress and was eager to change out of her coveralls. Moments later, straightening the vee neckline and adjusting her unpinned hair, she left the bathroom. "Well?" she asked. "Do you think your mystery spacer merchant will like it?"

Alikka replaced the coralline sculpture she had been admiring. She'd told Ketrian the merchant carried new stock, and arranged this meeting. "Oh, yes. Very much." She smiled then turned back to the shelves lining the living room. "Are you sure you can find room for any more?"



Ketrian laughed as she picked up her coat. "There's always room for more."

"Maybe if you moved all those awful swords and knives from the other wall?"

Ketrian moved to it, considering. She reached out to touch one of the smaller swords, a fencing foil. The first time she'd seen Stevan Makintay he'd been giving a demonstration with that sword. He moved with all the sure grace of a feline.

Watching the softening of Ket's expression, Alikka wondered if she were doing the right thing, deceiving Ket. But Ali had to do her best to aid the Rebellion.

"No," Ketrian said, "too many memories." She'd bet Mak never spared her a thought. His only true love was the stars. He'd certainly been eager to abandon her for them. "Come on," she pulled on her coat, "we'll be late."

They stepped outside and into their waiting speeder, annoyed as always to see another speeder a short distance behind. Pedrin's watchers.

When they arrived at the Lantern Inn, Ketrian was further annoyed to find Grathal, a familiar antiques dealer, waiting for them. He explained that the interstellar merchant didn't like to display his wares in public -- especially with Imperial officials nearby. Customs excise could ruin him. Grathal showed them a back exit through the storage cellar.

"I don't know about this," Ketrian said nervously as they stepped out into the damp night air.

"Oh, come on," Alikka urged. "Where's your spirit of adventure? He's a smuggler. How romantic."

"Well," Ketrian decided as Grathal guided them to his speeder, "it will be good to get away from Pedrin's clowns for a while. They're probably just coming in the front door now."

Grathal drove them deeper into the more squalid sectors by the river and finally stopped in a gloomy alleyway by a dilapidated warehouse. Grathal opened the speeder door, letting in the foggy air.

"People disappear in these parts," Ketrian said sourly, "then their bodies wash up in the harbor."

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic." Alikka pushed her out. "Aren't you the one who's so good with knives?"

"Yes. But I don't wear them with a dress."

Grathal guided them to the warehouse's side door and they stepped inside. The room was low-ceilinged, closed in by cracked rust-metal walls, and smelled of damp and fish. In the center stood a rickety table over which hung a single glow rod. About the table stood two men and a youth in various ill-matched drab clothing. On the table stood some datacards, a holo-projector, and datapads.

"Who are they?" Ketrian asked Grathal. "I thought this was an exclusive showing? Where are the samples?"

There was a creaking as a rear door opened. A tall man in a blue jacket entered -- Ketrian surmised he was the merchant. He wore a blaster low on his right thigh. Ketrian checked and noted that the other people were similarly armed.

"Hello, Ketrian," the merchant said, turning to her. There was a thin white scar high on his cheek. "It's been a long time."

"Mak!" Ketrian exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" She turned angrily to Alikka. "Did you know about this? What's going on here?"

"I knew," Alikka admitted somewhat guiltily. "He said he needs to talk to you, to explain ... "

"Explain!" Ketrian snapped. "Explain what? That he's fooled you the way he fooled me. Is that the truth of it, Mak? Are you here to start another peasant revolt? Didn't you have your fill of blood and death last time? I see you've found more martyrs for your cause." She waved an arm at the group by the table. "Are they ready to die just so you can get even with your father?"

"Well," he drawled, making his way to the table, "I see you haven't changed."

She stared at him. "I'm leaving."

"Please..." Alikka stepped between her and the door. Grathal was nowhere in sight. "Stay, Ket. For me. For my brother." Ket knew he was in one of Pedrin's labor camps. "I wanted you to come here more than any of these people. I couldn't tell you about it where we might be overheard."

"Oh, Ali," Ketrian sighed. "What are you up to now? You know Pedrin suspects you."

"It's as well someone's trying to prevent more Alderaans," a highpitched youthful voice said from the table.

Ketrian turned to the speaker, the young man. "Don't tell me you believe those lies?"

"Which?" he threw back at her. "That Alderaan was planning germ warfare? That we all had an incurable plague? That ... "

"Enough, Merak." A graying man moved to place his hand to the youth's shoulder. "We share your pain, and your mourning for your lost home."

Ketrian stared. "You're Alderaanian?"

He nodded proudly. "One of the few."

Mak stepped forward. "All Merak asks is that you hear him out. He has some holo-tapes he wants you to see." Ketrian looked uncertain. "Not just Alderaan. The Empire's been busy lately."

"So," Ketrian said slowly, "You're working with them now?"

"The Rebel Alliance?" Mak said. "Yes. Best move I ever made. For once in my life I've found the means to really help people. Hear us out, Ket. That's all we ask. Then if you still want, you can go."

Ketrian stiffened angrily. "This ... " she indicated the holomachine, "is the only reason you came here?"

"No," he smiled. It was the same heart-wrenching, gentle smile she remembered. "This was a neat excuse, a chance for me to see you again. Merak and the team could have handled it, but I talked my way in. I've never stopped thinking about you, Ket. About the day I was forced to leave you."

"Forced!" she sneered. "You ran away from your father's threats. Ran to your precious stars. Your father couldn't bear having you marry a lowborn instead of that lady he chose for you. I thought you were willing to stand by me, but you abandoned me."

"We have evidence of the truth behind Makintay's disappearance too," another of the Rebels spoke up. "Your would-be husband spent a year in a penal colony on Garen IV after he was kidnapped and dumped there with a false ID."

"Penal colony?" Ketrian wanted to believe, to heal that old wound.

Mak nodded sadly. "My father made sure I vanished someplace where I'd never be heard of again." He picked up one of the datacards. "Eventually I escaped and came back here to lead that uprising. When it failed, the Alliance contacted me. It's all here."

"Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

He shrugged. "Officially, I was an escaped felon. All I earned from the uprising was a death mark. You were secure, working for the Empire."

She held his gaze for a long moment, then looked away. "So many people suffered needlessly for your uprising. Can't you see the Rebel Alliance is no different? All this making war is futile, Mak. Futile. I'll hear what your friends have to say, that's all."

"Fair enough," Mak agreed, waving her to a chair.

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"It's no use, Ali," Mak said an hour later. "She's made up her mind."

"Your Alliance is no different than the Empire," Ketrian repeated, glaring at the group about the holo-projector. "You're only interested in what I can do for you. And you," she turned to Makintay, "all you care about is your X-wing repairs."

"How can you go on working for Palpatine after what we've shown you?" Merak demanded.

"I knew he wasn't perfect," Ketrian told him. "He's human, like all of us. Given the same unlimited power, who can say your leaders would not become just as corrupt?" She picked up her coat. "I've been here too long already. Pedrin's goons will be asking questions. Where's Grathal?"

"He had to get back," Mak said. "We have another speeder hidden nearby. I'll drive you to the inn." Ketrian stormed past him as he opened the door. "Don't mind her," he told Merak, "that was her standard argument. It's easy to think of no one but yourself if you label everyone else as worthless."

Ketrian hesitated, then stalked outside. It was raining and she pulled her coat hood about her face. Makintay and Alikka said nothing as they joined her.

They'd gone only a few paces when Mak suddenly stopped. He cocked his head and peered up into the night sky. "Listen," he said. Then they heard it too, the roar of airspeeders. On Hargeeva only the Imperial military used airspeeders. Searchlights settled on the warehouse and its surroundings.

"Slag!" Mak cursed. "They've found us. Come one. This way. Hurry!" He pulled them into a narrow connecting alley.

Behind them a blaster battle erupted as the trapped Rebels returned fire. Then a mighty explosion filled the streets with a flare of light.

"What was that?" Alikka said.

"We can't help them now." Mak said grimly, urging her forward. He skidded to a halt at the next corner. "Troopers," he snarled. "They found our speeder." He drew his blaster, looking set to make a fight of it.

Ketrian stared at him. "What are you trying to do, get me killed? I've got nothing to hide." She made to step around him.

"You think they'll believe that?" Mak pulled her back. But too late, the movement had been seen. A blaster bolt impacted where Ketrian had stood.

"Drop your weapons and step clear of the building," the ranking trooper called.

"Now look what you've done," Ketrian wailed. "They think I'm a Rebel, too."

"They've got us trapped," Mak cursed. "When those speeders show up, they'll blast us. There's only one way out. You two will have to be my prisoners. Hostages, okay?"

"Hostages?" Ketrian gaped at him.

"Good idea," Alikka said, then to Ketrian, "it's our only chance." The trooper repeated his command for them to surrender, and added, "This is your final warning." Overhead, they could hear an airspeeder closing, its lights turning night into day.

Mak didn't need that illumination to see Ketrian's face -- she had gone as white as snow. "I'm sorry, Ket," he said. "Come on." Mak put an arm about Ket's throat and shoved Ali forward with the blaster.

A searcher light immediately blinded them all and a snarling voice called, "Drop that weapon, Rebel."

"Back off or I kill them," Makintay shouted.



The Imperials didn't allow him a moment for negotiation. The ground trooper and another in the speeder fired in unison, sending concentric blue power ripples through the rain. Ketrian felt Makintay try to shield her, then the stun blast darkness became complete.

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The next Ketrian knew stark white light was filtering through her eyelids and the acrid smell of antiseptic assailed her nostrils. Her stomach heaved and she rolled to one side.

"Please use the waste unit," a droid's unemotional voice echoed about her.

Ketrian fell from the narrow bunk onto a duracrete floor that bruised her knees. She grabbed at the nearby waste unit, turned and threw up into it.

"Thank you," the droid responded. There was a whirring of servomotors as he came closer. Long metal arms heaved her back onto the bunk. "You are functional?" it asked, glowing photoreceptors and sensors assessing.

"Oh, go melt your circuits." Ketrian wiped at her mouth. "Who are you and where am I?"

"Medical guard unit FM-6B at your service," he replied. "You are in Arginall Garrison Infirmary Cell number 23B."

"Cell!" Ketrian felt worse than ever as it all came back. "I am going to murder you, Makintay." She clutched at her head. "If I live."

"You are experiencing head pain?" the droid asked.

"How do I get out of here?" Ketrian demanded. "Open the door." She saw all four walls were completely smooth. No sign of an exit.

"I cannot do that," the droid answered. "You must be given proper clearance. First I have been programmed to provide medication that will hasten your return to full function."

Ketrian saw an appendage appear with a ready-filled hypodermic. "What is that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Standard treatment for your condition."

"Good," Ketrian sighed in relief. As she rolled up her sleeve, she found her new dress was torn and covered in mud. The hypo-spray discharged its load into her arm. She rubbed at it and asked, "Where is my friend, Alikka Nolan?"

"I am not programmed with that information," the droid responded.

Part of the wall slid open to reveal stormtrooper guards in a corridor. Then Major Pedrin stepped into the cell. "I see you've had your medication." His lips twitched in what could have been a smile. "Feeling better?" He pressed at his mustache as he lowered himself to sit on the single chair. "I've been worried about you, Ketrian. You received a double dose of stun shock."

"You should teach your troopers to shoot straight," Ketrian said angrily. "They could have killed me. Is that how you tell them to handle hostage situations? Where's Ali? She better be all right or I'll be making an official complaint."

Pedrin's eyes darkened to twin black holes. "You are in no position to make complaints, Miss Altrone. You and your friend deliberately avoided your guards at the inn. If not for the fact that they noticed the man who took you to the storage cellar and questioned him upon his return, we may never have located you."

"Grathal?" Ketrian's pulse raced and her mouth went dry as she wondered what the old man had told them. "Where is he now? I'd like to ask him a few things myself."

"Such as?" Pedrin leaned forward and she noticed he was recording her answers on a datapad.

"Such as how he could have managed to get so confused. He took us to the wrong address. Way back by the river. Ali and I thought we were meeting a sculpture dealer from off-world. You know how I collect such things?" He nodded. "I know we shouldn't have left without notifying your men, but Grathal said the dealer was worried about ... "

"Customs excise?"



"Yes," Ketrian sighed in relief. "Grathal explained?"

"That is what he told us, but it was not the full truth."

Ketrian swallowed. "It wasn't?"

"Who did you find waiting at that warehouse?"

"People," Ketrian said. She brushed mud from her skirt. They must have captured Makintay and identified him by now. "Resistance fighters. They wanted me to join them." She made it sound like a great joke. "Me. Can you imagine? When I refused they took Ali and me prisoner."

Pedrin said nothing for a long moment. Then he sighed, straightened and turned off the recorder. "Loyalty is an admirable trait, Ketrian," he said quietly, "but you cannot protect Miss Nolan forever. She knew where she was taking you last night."

"Surely not."

Pedrin gave her a stern look. "She knew. You see now why you needed my officers with you at all times?"

She nodded. "I'm glad they were able to rescue me. May I go home now?"

"Soon. First I want you to tell me all you know about Stevan Makintay. You and he declared your betrothal five years ago." He snorted disgustedly and said, "Makintay's father doesn't let a day go by without complaining of his son's choice. He wanted Stevan to marry some High Lady, I take it?" Ketrian nodded. Pedrin gave another of his reptilian smiles. "Personally, I'd say that was the single smart choice of Stevan's life."

Ketrian flushed. "I have work to do, Major. I should be getting back to the refinery. I don't think there is much I can tell you about Makintay. He abandoned me five years ago and I never heard from him again until last night."

"Yes," Pedrin agreed. "Of that, at least, we are certain. We had you both under close surveillance during your university days." Ketrian's head lifted in shock. "Security, you understand. We were assessing the elder Makintay for appointment to the position of Imperial Governor."

"And did you leave off that surveillance when Stevan disappeared?" Ketrian asked angrily.

"No," Pedrin admitted calmly. "You had become of strategic importance to the Empire by then also." She drew an angry breath and he lifted a hand to forestall her protest. "It was continued surveillance that allowed me to guarantee my superiors that you have no ties to the resistance movement." Ketrian sat back. "Now, about the prisoner. I find him quite a puzzle. Why would a man of such high breeding throw away all the privileges of his birth to aid these low-life Rebels? Unfortunately Makintay is the sole survivor of the group you met and he is proving to be ..." he paused, his lips pursing into a thin line of annoyance, "... stubborn. Most stubborn. Even his father had no success with him."

"The governor spoke to him?" Ketrian blurted. "He vowed never to do so again the night he disinherited Stevan."

"Yes," Pedrin murmured. "But Makintay Senior is governor for the Empire, and as such he must obey Imperial command. He was ordered to offer his son full reinstatement of his birthright should he co-operate with us and reveal the location of the Rebel base."

"Mak would never accept such an offer."

"Mak?" Pedrin cocked an eyebrow at her. "You know him well. He was most offensive. His father left in a rage. Young Makintay left me no alternative but to try drugs."



Ketrian swallowed hard. "Drugs? Then you have the location?" Pedrin's knuckles went white as he clutched at his datapad.

"No, it seems Makintay has been thoroughly prepared for this mission. Our drugs could not penetrate his obstinance. But that is of no consequence, we are currently employing more effective interrogation procedures." Pedrin's hooded eyes were full of perverse pleasure. "Makintay will break before another day dawns."

Shocked, Ketrian could do no more than stare.

Pedrin frowned. "I take it there is nothing you can tell me about him that might aid my questioning?"

Ketrian shook her head.

Pedrin got to his feet. "Well, I'm sure your aid won't be needed. Makintay proved his cowardice when he held you as a shield last night. You'd best go home. Rest. You have a long journey to make tomorrow."

"J-journey?" Ketrian said, dazed.

"Your alloy, Ketrian. It has caused considerable excitement among my superiors. They have commanded that you be transferred to Coruscant to continue your work under more secure conditions."

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After a sleepless night full of fear for herself and her friends, Ketrian was escorted to the starport. Pedrin was sullen and rumpled, as if he, too, had had little sleep. "I envy you," he said as he led her up the ramp to the waiting shuttle. "The Imperial capital. I was hoping I could get away from this backwater myself. I'm sure command would reward me if I could supply the location of the Rebel base."

"Oh?" Ketrian was pleased. "Makintay wouldn't talk?"

Pedrin scowled. "He would have if I'd had more time. Command says their experts will make him talk. Experts, pah! If I had their scan grids and fancy torture machines I could ... "

"Torture?" Ketrian paled. "Makintay is being transferred, too?"

Pedrin turned and pointed to the foot of the ramp. A squad of stormtroopers surrounded a single prisoner. "Even he's getting off this rock."

Horried, Ketrian watched as the troopers dragged a groggy, chained Makintay up the ramp. As they paused at the hatchway, Ketrian got a good look at Makintay's face. It was a mass of bruises, and his shirt was splattered with blood.

"Morning," he croaked in greeting, trying to find a smile.

"Silence!" His guard prodded him with a rifle butt. Makintay fell forward into the shuttle.

"Surely you cannot feel sympathy for him?" Pedrin said, noting Ketrian's stricken expression.

She shook her head: "I was thinking of Ali. Where is she?"

Pedrin shifted uncomfortably. "We will hold her until she gives us the names of her accomplices."

"Is she being beaten too?"

"I would advise you to forget your traitor friend." He took her arm. "Come, the shuttle is powering up."

She pulled free. "If I could get that location for you, would you let Ali go?"

"Of course."

"Then give me clearance to talk to Makintay aboard the transport."

"You'll have it." Pedrin smiled.

\* \* \*

Staring at the featureless gray walls of his tiny cell aboard the transport, Makintay decided that at least here he was being left alone. He marked time by the automatic dispensing of his rations every eight hours. Three times now. It seemed the transport's drive system was not in good shape. They were making frequent stops and short jumps. Fine by him, he was in no hurry.

The only positive thought he could find was knowing he'd convinced Ketrian he had not abandoned her. That and the look on her face when she'd seen him on the shuttle pad. She'd begun to feel again, the old spark was back in those lovely eyes.

Mak jumped as the cell door whooshed open. Silently the stormtrooper guards pushed him from the cell and marched him down the corridor to a small room. Its only furnishing was a chair fitted with restraints. The troopers pushed him into it, arranging him so that the electronic clamps activated, securing both arms and legs. Then they left him.

He waited, growing ever more nervous. The door opened and Ketrian entered. "Ket," he said with relief.

"You got me in a lot of trouble back there," she said. "You owe me."

"I'm not exactly in a position to grant favors." He noticed she didn't seem able to keep still, wringing her hands, pacing, fidgeting. Muscles jumped in her cheeks and the bare forearms showing below the jumpsuit's short sleeves. Her eyes glowed feverishly and her skin was an unhealthy greenish-yellow. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She stopped pacing and stared at him. "Okay? Oh, sure, I've never been better. I love being stunned, hauled in for questioning, and forced to leave my home."

He held her gaze. "I'm sorry, Ket. Truly sorry."

"And that's supposed to make everything all right?" She turned her back, grabbed at her elbows and began trembling from head to toe.

Mak frowned. She'd been through a rough time, but he'd been with her through worse times. He'd never seen her shake like that. Her posture and behavior reminded him of something ... of someone. "Are you sure you're not sick?" he repeated.

She swung back. "I've been throwing up ever since we left Hargeeva. This ship is jumping around so much, I can't stand it."

"Hyperspace never made you sick before. Maybe it was the stunshock."

"No," she resumed her pacing. "They fixed that back at the garrison."

Mak felt a chill run through him. Now he remembered where he'd seen similar symptoms. "They fixed you up? How?"

"Pedrin's med-droid gave me a shot. Happy? I wouldn't have needed it if you hadn't dragged me into this mess."

"No," he said slowly. "No, you wouldn't. You came here to ask me a favor?"

She nodded, began to speak but a sudden loud groaning from the hyperdrive engines drowned her out. The bulkheads creaked with transmitted strain, then steadied again. "Cursed garbage scow. It'll probably fall to pieces before we make the next stop." Tears filled her eyes. "And I don't think I'd care."



Mak wished he was free to hold her. "They told you about Alikka?" he guessed. She nodded. "Slag! She was a fine lady. I swear she didn't suffer, Ket. The drugs overloaded her heart."

Ketrian stared at him, her face managing to pale further. "What are you talking about? Pedrin told me she was still being questioned."

Mak cursed. "Filthy liar. I'm sorry, Ket. There's no mistake. We were in the same cell. I ... I held her as she died. She was talking about you, worried for you." Ketrian gaped at him, then began sobbing. Helpless, he could offer no comfort. "You see what your Empire does to people?"

"My Empire? It's not my Empire. It never has been."

"You work for them."

Ketrian's blue eyes flashed pure fury. "It was your cursed Alliance that killed Alikka." She gulped back a sob. "Pedrin said he'd let her go if ... "

"If I gave you the answers he wants?"

She nodded guiltily. "I only wanted to save Alikka."

"Oh, Ket. Don't you see? That's just how she felt. She wanted to save her brother, to save all the other victims of the Empire. To make sure there's never another Alderaan."

A deafening explosion rumbled through the deckplates that threw Ketrian from her feet. The transport shuddered and shook like an animal in its death throes. Then suddenly it went very still and quiet. Mak realized the drive had cut out. They were back in realspace.

He looked to Ketrian who was climbing unsteadily to her feet. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "What happened?"

"I think we've been sabotaged. I used to fly freight along these routes, they're thick with ... "

"Pirates!" someone shouted out in the corridor. A terrified naval ensign stuck his head in the door. "We're being boarded. Better get back to your cabin, Miss."

"What about him?" Ketrian indicated Makintay.

"Leave him. The troopers have all gone forward to battle the pirates. Come on, I have to escort you to your cabin. Hurry."

"I can't," she called. "I fell and hurt my ankle. Help me." The youngster came over and made to prop her up, then crumpled as she hit him hard with something she'd taken from her pocket.

Mak stared at her. She smiled nervously, opened her hand and revealed a piece of dull blue metal. "My new alloy. Pedrin told me to keep it secure."

The ship shuddered and they heard the sound of metal meeting metal as the pirates docked. Then a cacophony of battle sounds reverberated through the corridors.

"Get me out of this thing," Mak said, struggling against his restraints. She hit the release switch and he fell to the deck. As he sprawled on the deckplates, Mak noticed the pistol in the unconscious ensign's holster. Commenting, "while I'm down here," Mak grabbed the weapon then scrambled to his feet.

"What now?" Ketrian asked.

"We hotfoot it outta here and find an escape pod." He grabbed her hand and pulled her to the door: He leaned out, checked the corridor. "Clear. Come on."

"No, wait," she protested. "If anyone sees you in that outfit, they'll blast you." Makintay looked in dismay at his bright-colored prison clothes. Ketrian nodded at the unconscious man. "He looks about your size."

Mak grinned. "That's the woman I love." Impulsively he pulled her to him and kissed her.

"You do?"

"Always have," he said intently, holding her gaze. "But first I gotta get you outta here."

"Hey," she laughed, "who's rescuing who?" A spasm of nausea doubled her over. Makintay held her and as she met his gaze she saw naked fear in his eyes. Fear for her.

\* \* \*

They had not gone far before they realized they would need to find a less public route if they didn't want to be caught in the crossfire. The Imperials were rapidly losing ground against a better armed and more ferocious opponent.

"What are they?" Ketrian whispered, peering over Mak's shoulder as they crouched low in a shadow-filled fire equipment alcove.

"The ones that look like overgrown scaly swamp creatures are called Ghawems," he said. "We gotta steer clear of them. They'll be spouting methane gas from their backpacks. Come to think of it, they've probably already flooded the upper decks with the stuff. Slag! We'll have to find some breathers. Maybe I can grab one from one of the little blue furry guys."

"Wh-what?" she stammered as another wave of nausea swept through her. What was wrong with her? She was shaking almost constantly. She wasn't that scared.

"The Myills," he explained, turning to her. "They're sorta slaves of the Ghawems. They do all the dirty work. They'll be bringing up the rear and they breathe oxygen. Wait here."

"No way. I'm coming with you." She tried to stand but had to grab at the bulkhead.

"No point," he told her. "I'll have to come back this way anyhow and you need to rest. Give me that knife." She had claimed the weapon from a dead crewman and didn't look happy about giving it up. "I'm not leaving you unarmed," he explained. "I need it to work these bolts loose." He stood aside so she could see an engineering access cover on the bulkhead. "If I'm right, it opens onto a real maze of tunnels carrying all kinds of conduits. You'll be safe in there." She gave him the knife, and moments later he dropped the cover to the deck. The clang it made as it hit was lost to the background din of blaster shots, explosions and screams. He helped Ketrian climb up and in. "Don't wander off. I'll be back."

"You'd b-better be." She reached out and touched the scar on his cheek. "Be careful."

He took her hand. "You're as cold as ice. Here, take this coat." He shrugged out of it, handed it to her and replaced the access cover. Then he disappeared out into the corridor, pistol at the ready.

\* \* \*

Cowering in the pitch-black tunnel, Ketrian waited. Time passed and she grew more and more cold, glad for Mak's coat, certain it was all that kept her from freezing to death. Surely he should have been back by now. What if he didn't come? No, he would not abandon her, he never had. He said he loved her -- did she still love him?

Scrabbling sounds at the access cover filled her with terror. Had the pirates found her? She clutched hard at her knife. The cover fell back, flooding her hiding place with greenish, foul-smelling air. "Ketrian?" Mak called. "Are you there?"

"Wh-where else..." she coughed and choked. Makintay climbed up to her and clamped a breath mask over her face. She gulped pure, sweet air. Mak turned away and she heard him fumbling to replace the access cover. "Hey," she protested. "I thought we were leaving?"

Ketrian's surroundings became clearly visible as he lit a glow rod. She blinked as she got a good look at him. Blood ran from a shallow cut on his brow and he had some new bruises to add to the old. Several emergency survival packs were strapped about his now grimy uniform.

"I've got good news and I've got bad news," he told her, making an obvious effort to cheer her.

"Tell me," she sighed.

"The Imperials won't be bothering us anymore, but all the escape pods are gone."

"What? We can't stay here. What are we going to do?"



"Never fear," he winked. "I have a plan."

She groaned.

\* \* \*

"So you see," Makintay repeated some minutes later, "we've got all the supplies we need. All we gotta do is stay here and sneak out when they make port."

She scowled. "Oh, sure. We walk off this ship right into some pirate enclave. Great plan."

"Hey." He gave her a wounded look. "We don't know that they're heading for home. They might have a buyer lined up someplace."

"Right." She shivered harder. "I hope we don't have to stay here too long. It's freezing in here."

"It's not that cold, Ket," he sounded worried. "You're sick. If you get any worse, I'm gonna have to get you some help."

"From them?" she gaped.

"Yeah, why not? I did some deals with ol' Uskgarv in my traderpilot days."

"Uskgarv?"

"The esteemed leader of this motley bunch of pirates," he explained. "If we don't make landfall someplace in the next few hours, I'll talk to him. You don't look so good."

"Are you crazy?" she protested. "We don't have any bargaining power."

"Oh, yes, we do," Mak said quietly. "You're worth a fortune to the Empire."

"Ransom." He nodded and she thought that over. "I suppose, but I'm not keen on working for them anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. He drew her down to lean against his shoulder. "Had any other offers lately?"

She smiled. "One."

"And?"

"And it's looking better all the time." His arms closed about her.

\* \* \*

She woke some time later feeling sicker than ever in her life. Shuddering with fever, she looked up into Mak's eyes and saw her own fear reflected there. "What's wrong with me?" She saw his expression change. "You know, don't you?"

He sighed heavily. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell you. I've seen this before, with defectors who arrived at Eyrie Base."

"I d-don't understand."

"Poison, Ket." She stiffened with fear. "It's okay, there's an antidote. The problem is how to get you to it. We're outta time. I gotta go talk to Uskgarv. They should have some of the stuff in this transport's sickbay. Pedrin would have made sure of that. Just in case there were any delays getting you to Coruscant."

"He poisoned me?"

Mak nodded. "The med-droid, remember? It's standard Imperial procedure for keeping useful people from becoming useful defectors or healthy Alliance prisoners."

Pure fury flooded Ketrian's veins. "I wish Pedrin had been allowed to come on this trip. Maybe the pirates would let me dismember him."

Makintay chuckled. "Hold that thought." He moved back toward the access. "I'm gonna go get us some better accommodations."

\* \* \*

"Good news and bad news again?" Ketrian asked as Mak returned a second time. "Where's Uskgarv?"

"Gone," he said, looking both pleased and sad. "There's only a few Myills and their bosses out there. They're stripping anything of value and loading it on a freighter. They're in a real panic. Attack ships are heading this way. Imperial rescuers, I suppose. You'll be okay, Ket. As soon as they secure the transport, you'll have that antidote."

"And what about you?" she asked, squeezing his arm.

He shrugged: "I stick to plan A. Hide in here, hope they count me among the dead, then jump ship first chance I get."

"I don't want to go back to the Empire," she repeated. "But even more, I don't want to leave you again." She kissed him. "You say those shots the ship's doctor's been giving me were to keep the poisoning under control?" He nodded. "Right then. Sounds to me like it's not too dangerous out there now. I'll go up to sickbay. I know the stuff they've been giving me. I'll grab a load of it and bring it back here. Then I can stay in hiding with you."

He stared at her. "I don't know. Sounds risky."

"Life with you is always risky," she said. "That's the way I want it. I'm not taking no for an answer. It's not just us ... I can give my new alloy to the Alliance. For Ali."

He held her gaze for a long moment, then said in quiet agreement, "For Ali." Ketrian made to move forward and he took her arm, steadying her. "We did a lot of ducking and weaving through the corridors out there. Can you find the way?"

She gave him a wry smile. "I've become very familiar with this level recently. I must have paced every corridor a dozen times, trying to get up the nerve to talk to you, and trying to figure what to say when I did. I'll just head back to the main corridor then go forward and up two levels to sickbay. I know it well, too. Don't worry, I'll find it, even in all the murky air and emergency lighting."

Makintay nodded and helped her to the access. While he worked the cover free, Ketrian checked her jumpsuit pockets. "I'm not going out there without a knife," she told him as he turned to her. "I might come across a few of your pirate friends lurking about on the upper levels."

"We might at that," he said, firmly accenting the "we." He patted the pistol at his belt. "This will be useful, and maybe we can find one for you too." He made to climb down into the corridor but she grabbed him.

"No, Mak," she protested. "Please, stay here. It's too dangerous for you out there. If the Empire takes you prisoner again ... " she flinched and looked away. "Pedrin bragged about what they were going to do to you on Coruscant."

"I can imagine," Mak said sourly. He tilted her face up until she met his gaze. "No way are you going out there alone and sick. No problem. I'm a naval ensign," he tapped the insignia on his tunic. "Says so right here. This guy and all his pals are dead. I'll disappear long before anyone gets organized to do an ID check." She frowned uncertainly and he added, "Trust me."

She rolled her eyes beseechingly. "I knew you couldn't go much longer without saying that. All right, all right, lead on then. The sooner we get that medicine, the sooner I can get you back to your cozy little hidey-hole."

"You always did pick on my taste in interior decorating," he complained with mock insult, "I'm the one who grew up in a palace."

"Oh, do pardon me, Your Highness," she said and laughed. Mak reveled in the sound. He climbed out, then turned and lifted her into his arms, enjoying the feel of her as much as he did her laughter. How long had he waited to hold her, hoped to hear her laugh? Would he be forced to part with her again soon? Should he allow her to risk hiding out with him, being arrested and charged with treason if they found her with him? Conflicting emotions and arguments raced through his mind as he cautiously led the way to the end of the corridor. There, he paused and peered around the corner.

The methane gas seemed to be clearing, though they were still better off using breath masks. Ahead lay another corridor bathed in dim red light. Bloodied bodies littered the deckplates. Silence was broken only by sporadic, muffled sounds of blaster fire. Ketrian was right -- any stray pirates could easily be forced back this way. He and Ketrian best stay alert.

As they entered the main corridor, they were thrown off their feet by the shockwave of an explosion somewhere above and forward of them. "What was that?" Ketrian panted fearfully as she pushed herself to sit beside Makintay.

"Probably standard pirate tactics," he told her. "Booby trap the hatchways. Come to think of it, we'd better avoid the turbolifts too."

Ketrian groaned. "Stairs? Two whole levels?" She was already breathless and frighteningly weak as he helped her back to her feet.

"You're not doing any climbing," Mak said. "I'll carry you."

"No, you won't," she refused. "Hang onto that pistol. One of us has to be ready to fight. I'm in no shape to use this knife."

"You?" he teased. "The lady who can take off a bug's wing at a hundred paces? Well ... " He touched his forefinger to the scar below his eye. "Then again, I remember you do have your off days."

She bit back a smile. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Nope," he grinned, but the smile faded as he held her gaze and said softly, "All those long months in prison this scar was all I had to remind me of you."

"Oh, Mak," she whispered. Tenderly she traced the mark she'd given him in an accident caused by her jealousy. "If only I'd known where you were. I would have gotten you out of there. I swear it."

"I know you would have." He kissed her fingers. She was trembling with fever chills. "But right now it's me that has to get you out of here. Come on. Lean on me."

Gratefully, she did so. Later, halfway up a stairwell, she collapsed and was too weak to struggle free as he insisted on carrying her. At the exit door he lowered her gently to her feet.

"Wait here," he advised. "I'm gonna check around outside. I'm sure I heard something. Sounded like troopers."

"Then I should go and you wait," she panted.

"No," he repeated. He stepped hurriedly through the door before she had a chance to argue further. Thus distracted, he missed spotting the man crouched in hiding in a smoke-filled alcove further down the corridor. A blaster bolt hissed bare centimeters past his left shoulder and burned a hole in the bulkhead behind him. He instinctively dropped flat and rolled into the shelter on the other side, another volley of blaster bolts chasing him.

"Mak," Ketrian called fearfully. "Are you okay?"

The stairwell door slid open further. Ketrian was not fool enough to show herself but Mak knew her fear for him might drive her out. "Stay there," he shouted across, unable to see her from his position. Maybe the pirates would turn and run if he gave them enough motivation. He leaned out and fired a few shots, catching a quick glimpse of his targets as they tried to make ground toward him through the dim light. Not pirates, and not stormtroopers.

"What the ... ?" Mak muttered, both puzzled and hopeful. Those uniforms ... He risked sticking his head out for another look and very nearly had it shot off. "Hey," he cried, "you're Rebels."

"You bet we are," a familiar voice shouted back. "If you wanna stay in one piece, Imp, you'll toss that pistol into the corridor and come out with your hands up. Now."

"Okay, okay," Mak said happily. "I surrender. You win, Hal. It's me. Mak. I'm coming out. Don't shoot me." Pulling the breath mask from his face and grinning from ear to ear, he threw the pistol down and stepped into the corridor.

"It's me. Makintay," he repeated, holding his hands high over his head. "It wouldn't look good on your record if you blasted your squadron leader, Lieutenant Dallin."

"Mak," the pilot called in delighted recognition. "It is you, isn't it? What are you doing in that uniform?"

"Of course it's me," Mak laughed, coming closer but not daring to lower his arms. "The uniform suits me better than a prison outfit." More men stepped out behind Dallin. "Keto, Erik," Mak greeted. "Intelligence finally sent you guys to the right place for once."

"Intelligence, pah," corvette co-pilot Keto snorted. "We've been hoping we might run across your path ever since we heard you'd been captured and shipped out. We found this stray all by ourselves." The big burly black man poked the slack-jawed Dallin. "I think you better tell him he can put his hands down before he decided to have you demoted, Hal."

"Uh, yeah, right," Dallin mumbled.

"Mak?" Ketrian called from the stair exit. "What's going on out there?"

"We've been rescued, Ket," he called, moving to her. "Come on out and meet my friends."

\* \* \*

Makintay leaned over the Rebel doctor's shoulder and watched as the hypodermic discharged its load into Ketrian's arm. "Are you sure that's the right stuff?" Mak asked anxiously.

The gray-haired Rebel sighed heavily. "I am a medic. I have been specifically trained to treat this poison. Have you?"

"Just checking," Mak said. He turned to Ketrian who was lying comfortably propped up on the sickbay bed. "How do you feel? You still look pale."

Ketrian shook her head in amusement and reached out and patted Makintay's hand. "I feel better than you will if you keep annoying the doctor. You can't expect the antidote to work that fast."

"Why not?" he said, then asked the medic. "How soon will she be back on her feet?"

"Mak," Ketrian chided. "Stop fussing and let the poor man tend the wounded. I'm fine and I'm not taking up this bed when there are others who need it more." She moved to sit up.

"Thank you, Miss Altronel," the medic smiled down at her. "Perhaps you could have the commander escort you back to your cabin. You should be feeling much better by the time we land on Eyrie."

"Eyrie?"

"Your new home," Mak told her. He bent to slide his arms beneath her and pick her up. "You're gonna love it. Warm and sunny. And we have our very own beach."

"Beach?" she said, pleased. Then she remembered to protest, "Put me down. I can walk."

"Uh-uh," he refused and kissed the top of her head. "Save your energy. You'll need it when the big brass find out about that little gift you're carrying in your pocket for them."

"Oh, the alloy," she chuckled. "That's what started all this and I nearly forgot about it. Did I tell you it could be used to increase the firepower of your X-wings?" He almost came to a halt in surprise as he carried her down the corridor. He stared at her and shook his head. "Well, it can. Not directly, you understand. It's all to do with heat absorption. If we replace the laser cannon tips with it, it should ... "

Listening, Makintay smiled. He wondered how many more improvements she would invent in all the years they would have together -- if the Force was with them.